Whither Legacy Cities

Legacy cities are historically iconic places. They are the places where many of the nation's most important narratives were played out in real time. And they are places that disproportionately contribute to our memory of the more complicated chapters of the American story.

Consider how the following chapters have a distinctly urban inflection: immigration and migration, political reform, technological breakthroughs, contestations over class, ethnic and race and, of course, artistic creativity and expressiveness.

Legacy cities were at the vanguard of the American Revolution and the many social and political upheavals that were to follow.

Such cities are once again at or near the center of American life in the post industrial age.

And yet despite their historical stature, America's legacy cities--from the early years of the Republic--were seen as somehow ill-placed in the society to which they collectively contributed so much. Thomas Jefferson, the young nation's most influential statesmen, envisioned an American future dominated by men who labored on the land. "Those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people," Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The author of the Declaration of Independence, and architect for much

of what accounted for Republican values during the first half of the 19th century, was not alone in his affectionate, sentimental embrace of the supposedly superior virtue of rural America over towns and cities. Far into that century, as the historian Thomas Bender has observed, an anti-urban bias permeated the sentiments of early American leaders. Cities were customarily viewed with suspicion, places to be dreaded, as George Washington put it. That view was held not only by the planter aristocracy of which Jefferson and Washington were prominent members. Benjamin Franklin, who had lived only in urban places, designated farming "the most honorable of all Employments." Indeed, for most of the nation's history, even when its future as an urban industrial society was assured, farm land and those who tilled it, save the slaves, were seen as quintessentially American symbols and the values of rural folk were seen as the bedrock of the society. Cities and city folk were seen as a stark contrast to the goodness thought to exist in the countryside and its people. It was generally believed throughout much of the 19th century that American cities cleaved to Europe, to its vices and corruption.

Over time such views receded, but they never quite disappeared in a nation suspicious and scornful of its cities…even as an urban culture increasingly defined American greatness.

And so as we assemble here, we must acknowledge the complicated and contested story of America's legacy cities.

I live, work and play in a legacy city, Newark, New Jersey. If we were to ignore the founding Spanish towns in North America, and we should not, Newark is the third oldest American urban community.

Its age has mattered: Newark prominently figured in the American Revolution, in the Industrial Revolution during the ante-bellum and Civil War years, and during the Ellis Island and Great Migration Eras, and, of course, during the urban disorders of the late 1960s.

The last chapter was a part of the precipitous decline of Newark, and most other legacy cities, during the decades that followed the ending of World War II. Legacy cities witnessed plummeting populations, especially among their white and white ethnic residents—those on their way to becoming white. Such cities became havens for hundreds of thousands of new immigrants—no longer from eastern and southern Europe, but rather from the American south and the Spanish speaking Diaspora. And, finally, nearly catastrophic public policy decisions in housing and transportation were made that imperiled legacy cities, especially my legacy city—Newark.

Huge swaths of the city's 19th and early 20th century built environment became unsightly relics of a by-gone era, all but forgotten

for what they once represented. As Kathleen Crowther reminded us yesterday, much of the architectural language of that period invoked beauty, determination, power and the importance of civic culture.

Over time, an ethos of civic amnesia conspired with liberal public policy objectives bereft of social objectives, doing so in a way that rationalized years upon years of demolition of old neighborhoods, the reshuffling of lives and the siloing of the poor within legacy cities.

How best can legacy cities, such as Newark and Cleveland, cultivate preservationist interest in the remains of a very long day, including the architectural gems bequeathed by the industrial elite, the sacred edifices that once harbored believers who have moved up and moved out, the parks, commercial venues, factories, and other places created in what was not only a distant era but a very different America culture.

How might we <u>at once</u> acknowledge the importance of symbols of past privilege and symbols of a larger determination to sustain identity, to create safe sacred and secular harbors, and to give meaning to freedom in the 19th and 20th centuries?

In my academic realm, that of African American history, we have sought to tell stories long obscured by American amnesia and a blatant

indifference to the presence of Africans on American soil. That indifference, we now know, is ending in the contemporary American historic preservation movement, as efforts are well underway to diversify and enlarge the ranks of preservationists. This is one of the objectives of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which coincides with our interest in using historical narratives—such as the Civil War and the Modern Civil Rights Movement—to complicate the deeper meaning of American legacy.

It seems to me that the more we historic preservationists critically historicize the built environment--the more we weave into that narrative the way that race, class, gender, and power complicated why and by whom the built environment was created--the greater are the chances that more of our fellow citizens, our elected officials and our benefactors—actual and potential—will indentify with our aspirations.

In Newark, so much was torn down to make way for a colossal public housing sector from the 1930s through the 1960s, the city all the more lost sense of its former self, or, should I say former selves. (Show slides of public housing)

Beginning in the 1970s, an interracial group of tenacious local residents began an effort to reclaim the James Street Commons, which

became Newark's first Historic Preservation District. (Show slides of James Street)

I close with this perspective: to live, work and engage the life and times of legacy cities is an act of faith and perseverance. It requires that we sustain our aspirations as preservationists through a thicket of obstacles placed in our way by conflicting interests and by a latent Jeffersonian distrust of cities and their people.

But our work will also require from us a greater literacy about what the city used to be, who lived on its margins and how their stories mattered back in the day and, all the more, how their stories matter right now.

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